

Guest Commentary: State health care system needs improving

**By Assemblyman Ted Gaines -
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Improving health care in California is much more than a debate about government programs or budget figures -- it's about the real challenges faced by Northern California families to afford the quality medical care they need to lead long and healthy lives.

With so much at stake, I believe lawmakers should conduct a full diagnosis of our state's health care problems before even considering massive government programs or costly tax hikes that may make matters even worse.

Recently, I was appointed as a new member of the Assembly Health Committee, which will play an important role in considering the various health care reform measures proposed this year. I believe it is vital that lawmakers act responsibly in solving our state's health care challenges, as our actions will have a significant impact on the health and well-being of every Californian.

Right now, there are 4.8 million Californians who have no health coverage at any point during the year, though 2.1 million of that total have annual family incomes of greater than \$50,000 but choose not to purchase insurance. Hundreds of thousands more are eligible for existing state health programs like Medi-Cal and Healthy Families but don't bother to enroll.

Unfortunately, some have proposed a costly new jobs tax on small businesses as their solution for California's health care challenges. Small businesses want to provide health insurance to their workers, but many simply cannot afford the expensive premiums and rising costs.

As the owner of a small insurance agency, I understand firsthand the challenges faced by small businesses just trying to keep their heads above water while complying with California's high tax rates, burdensome regulations and constant threat of junk lawsuits. Imposing a jobs tax could be the final nail in the coffin for many small businesses, causing many workers to lose their jobs without addressing their lack of health care.

Current proposals on the table to create massive new government programs and a jobs tax are estimated to cost as much as \$12 billion. Rather than blowing up the system, lawmakers should focus on the real problems, such as providing more

options and making coverage more affordable, especially for the 1 million-plus who have no insurance and are ineligible for current programs.

Republicans believe that Californians should have more choices and freedom when it comes to their health coverage. We should not settle for the one-size-fits-all plans that have driven up costs with expensive mandates. Instead, we should promote alternatives like catastrophic care, which provide affordable insurance for emergencies and serious health problems, to encourage the young and uninsured to buy coverage.

Instead of creating massive new government programs that will bust the budget, government and business can work together to lower costs and reduce the uninsured population in a fiscally responsible manner. Through health care tax incentives, we can reduce out-of-pocket costs for individuals and enable more businesses to offer coverage to their workers. Conforming state tax law on health savings accounts will give employers another affordable option for providing health care to their workers. With health savings accounts, contributions are made to tax-free accounts that may be used to purchase health services that meet individual needs.

I am confident that we can meet our state's health care challenges if we act responsibly and focus on solutions to the problems faced by real Californians, while resisting the temptation to embrace the failed ways of the past or increase taxes.
